

Dear beloved members of Yale's Jewish community,

I hope my message finds each of you well - growing in your studies, contributing through your work, and held close by friends. This message is long, because its subject is fraught and complex - and I'm asking you to stay with me all the way to the end. And, as I always do, I invite your replies - of dissent or addition; of what I have omitted or even gotten right; of where you are now, and what I should know about the texture of your lives.

These past two weeks have been unlike anything I've experienced, or ever thought I would experience - and unlike anything in the living memory of Yale's Jewish community. On October 7 and the days that followed, we together confronted the horror of Hamas's staggering massacre of Israelis. We grieved, and are still grieving; we prayed for the safe return of hundreds of captives, and we will keep praying for them until they come home.

And that is not the only thing our community has faced. While we have received much-needed support and kindness from both within and outside the Jewish community, many of the people with whom we share a campus have been unsympathetic, and even hostile, to our suffering. I wrote the following words two weeks ago - and in the intervening fifteen days, the conflict they describe has only grown:

All of us on the Slifka staff are hearing stories from you - not only of professors, but also students, friends, roommates, and suitemates - who are posting content that tries to do one or more of the following: celebrate Hamas's successes; justify Hamas's actions as Israel's fault; express sympathy for only Palestinian residents of Gaza and not Israelis; erase the difference between Israeli civilian casualties, which Hamas has tried to maximize, and Palestinian civilian casualties, which the IDF works to minimize; makes preposterous allegations against the IDF; I'm sure there are others.

We're feeling isolated and even threatened because, in a very real sense, we are. And I want to say, as I always do, that Jews are not the only isolated and threatened Yalies right now - nor are we the only ones grieving. The reports I hear about the welfare of many of the Arab and Muslim students at Yale are distressing, and ought to concern every member of our community. I have heard that they are feeling fear and alienation on campus, compounded by grief for family and fellow Muslims who have been killed in the war. In addition to holding our own pain, Judaism calls on us to expand our hearts to hold theirs as well. Our prayers, in some measure, overlap with theirs: it is a Jewish concern that as few civilians are caught in the cross-fire in Gaza (and I know that for some members of our community, this is the paramount Jewish concern right now), and we hope that they will all be spared the scourge of war. I will not tire of insisting that we as a community support other communities and refrain from any aggression

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towards them; our pain and despair should cause us to turn not only inward in solidarity, but also outward in empathy.

I am writing here, to our community, and not in the YDN, because I am addressing our sorrows and fears, the heartache of Yale's the Jewish community. I'm writing pastorally, not politically. I don't aim to argue or convince. I just want to give language and form to what I've heard so many of you are feeling and trying to understand - and to let you know that we are here with you, and you are not facing this alone.

You should know that when you explain how and why you're hurting or afraid, and get responses like "this is embarrassing, bffr" or "this is stupid LMAO" (I'm quoting just two of the posts shared with me; I know many of you have experienced countless like this, and worse) - you're right to be disturbed and angry. And you're right to want others to be upset on your behalf. And you're right to be disappointed in your peers, and aghast at a culture in which the exclusion of Israelis from the circle of the grievable isn't immediately and widely recognized as hideous. And you're right to begin to ask broader questions about what a Yale education means, and whether people here are able to have real conversations and to think and to hold complexity when it matters, and to wonder and worry about what the world will look like when you and your peers assume the mantle of leadership. There are other, particular experiences, no less important for not being as widely shared - I am thinking especially of those of you who have devoted years building relationships on the left, and are now facing distinctive types and degrees of grief and isolation. If you don't recognize yourself and your experiences in the accounts I've given - please let me know what and who I am missing.

And I want to say - actually, I don't want to, at all, but I must - that what you are encountering when your grief is waved away, when your outrage is mocked, or when you're told that the death of someone you loved or shared an identity with is a necessary step towards liberation - is antisemitism. I say this with a heavy heart, as someone who has for years told countless parents that there is no antisemitism of note here at Yale. Either I was wrong, or things have changed very, very quickly.

I can't fix or change this reality, but I can help you understand and navigate it. I want to do that in three ways: sharing the recent history of Yale's successful rejection of antisemitism, to confirm your sense that things can and should be different; sketching the theory of antisemitism that has been most helpful to me during my time at Yale; and laying out what the presence and even prominence of antisemitism at Yale does and doesn't mean for Jewish life here.

First, history. Yale's most recent reckoning with antisemitism was nine years ago, during the 2014 Israel-Hamas war. It began when Professor Deborah Lipstadt, now President Biden's Special Envoy to Combat Antisemitism, published a New York Times op-ed, "[Why Jews are Worried](#)," detailing the rise in antisemitic violence and rhetoric across the globe over the preceding five years, and Yale's Episcopal

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Chaplain at the time, Rev. Bruce Shipman, responded. In his [letter to the editor](#), reproduced below, Rev. Shipman cast violence against innocent Jews as the natural, even justified, response to Israel's policies:

Deborah E. Lipstadt makes far too little of the relationship between Israel's policies in the West Bank and Gaza and growing anti-Semitism in Europe and beyond.

The trend to which she alludes parallels the carnage in Gaza over the last five years, not to mention the perpetually stalled peace talks and the continuing occupation of the West Bank.

As hope for a two-state solution fades and Palestinian casualties continue to mount, the best antidote to anti-Semitism would be for Israel's patrons abroad to press the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for final-status resolution to the Palestinian question.

Mr. Shipman's letter was greeted with widespread [outrage](#) for its victim-blaming: the way to get people to stop attacking Jews, he would have us believe, isn't by reforming the perpetrators, or protecting the victims, but by forcing Jews to behave better. We would - and should - cry foul when any group is blamed for the violence directed at it, and nothing should change when the group is we Jews. (In the years since 2014, our vocabulary has been enriched with just the right word to describe this kind of twisted inversion: gaslighting.) The Episcopal Church, to its credit, [demanded Rev. Shipman's resignation](#). To be clear (and contrary to the [retelling](#) of this event in the YDN last year) Rev. Shipman was not fired "because of his condemnation of the war on Gaza," but because he placed the blame for the murder of innocent Jews on Jews, exonerating our attackers.

Nine years ago, Professor Lipstadt cataloged incidents in which several Jews were killed (March 2012, Toulouse; May 2014, Brussels); the total deaths recounted didn't make it into the double digits. Today, we are grieving 1,400 Jews killed and 220 taken captive. And somehow, still, there are people at Yale (and not only Yale) blaming Jews for the slaughter of innocent Jews. This sentiment is well-captured in Y4P's [language](#) on Instagram: "We hold the Israeli Zionist regime responsible for the unfolding violence... The events of October 7th are the inevitable outcome" of Israel's policies. Bruce Shipman could have written these words; those who raise their voice with Y4P could just as well have written his 2014 letter to the Times.

I am no defender of many of Israel's policies. I have written against them in this forum in the past, and imagine I will have to again. But nothing could be more beside the point: no one is inevitably forced to kidnap babies, or massacre wheelchair-bound revelers at a rave - it is a choice, and a heinous one, that Hamas commanders and militants made, and for which they, and no one else, must answer. In 2014, a single person's blaming Jews for the harassment and killing of fewer than a dozen Jews was a university-wide scandal. In 2023, when a full organization at Yale blames the Jewish state for the murder

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of fourteen hundred innocent Jews, and hundreds of students attend that organization's events and chant alongside its members in unison - this great university, to preserve its own integrity, must reckon with its students' (and professors') confusion of evil with liberation.

While we cannot tell Yale how to conduct itself, we can and should insist that it see the conduct of those who bear its name for the moral and educational crisis it is, and to act with urgency and purpose. I want to recognize and thank all of you who are already engaged in this work - through raising your concerns to deans and professors, and to colleagues in classes and extracurriculars. Uri and I and our entire staff and board of directors stand behind you and are working alongside you. Even though advocating for ourselves is not easy, and none of us wanted this to be a part of our years at Yale, you should know that you are not alone in this conflict, and that when you speak up you are not representing yourself alone, but our entire, united community.

Second, I want to share a distinct definition of antisemitism, as a tool to help you handle what you're seeing and hearing. The theory of antisemitism that has proven the most useful during my years here at Yale is that of the contemporary Israeli-American artist (and my friend) Tirtzah Bassel. Bassel formulates antisemitism in terms drawn from contemporary philosopher Kate Manne's *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. On Bassel's reading, Manne says something to the effect of, "Misogyny is the resistance to women's assertion of power *as women*. And if you replaced 'women' with 'Jews', you'd have a good definition of antisemitism."

The key here is that antisemitism isn't primarily about hurting or killing Jews, and it's not based on some theory of racial inferiority (or superiority). Instead, antisemitism is a fear, and hatred, of Jewish power - expressed primarily as a readiness to believe that Jews, when organized and acting together on large scales, are dangerous, the very essence of evil. The clearest and most influential example of this genre is the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which conjures the fantasy of a global Jewish financial and political conspiracy bent on subjugating the other nations of the world beneath its tentacles. Bassel's theory of antisemitism, like a scientific theory, makes a prediction: Israel, as the greatest assertion of power by Jews as Jews in the last two millennia, should be a locus of antisemitism. (This of course does not imply that all criticism of Israel is antisemitic, nor that Israel is the only site of antisemitism, more on that below).

The 33rd chapter of Hamas's charter is crystal-clear confirmation:

The Zionist plan is limitless. After Palestine, the Zionists aspire to expand from the Nile to the Euphrates. When they will have digested the region they overtook, they will aspire to further expansion, and so on. Their plan is embodied in the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion", and their present conduct is the best proof of what we are saying.

Leaving the circle of struggle with Zionism is high treason, and cursed be he who does that.

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The most visible, concentrated power that Jews have accrued as Jews - Israel - is linked directly to the 1903 Protocols, and depicted as a step in a diabolical conspiracy to subjugate the entire world. Even neutrality towards Zionism (“leaving the circle of struggle”) is “high treason”: the only moral posture is to stridently work to eradicate the Jewish state. What had previously taken the form of blood libels - damning, false accusations that not only permit but morally require the use of violence against their Jewish targets - has, since the advent of Israel, continued in an eagerness to see Jewish collective self-assertion as the face of evil itself. Instead of charges of killing innocent babies, the litany of Jews’ alleged sins take on a contemporary form, hybridizing and weaponizing the work of Jewish human-rights pioneers Hersh Lauterpacht and Raphael Lemkin (who coined the terms ‘crimes against humanity’ and ‘genocide’ - more gaslighting) with the neo-Leninist vocabulary of colonialism and western imperialism (which isn’t, and never was, the only way to study the relations of peoples and power across the world). The false charges would, if true, justify and even require the taking up of arms against Israel, in the name of all that is good.

For those who accept Hamas’s, or Y4P’s, idea that unwavering hatred of Zionism is demanded of every morally upright person, and that any neutrality towards Jewish self-assertion is (high) treason, it is impossible to grieve the deaths of Israelis, because there is no such thing as an innocent Israeli. For people under the influence of these slanders, the death of Jews who live in Israel becomes, as horrible as it is to write these words, a vital step in the redemption of the world. On this grotesque theory, antisemitism revived and disguised as (a dark, distorted form of) decolonization, the deaths of innocent Israelis, even when not celebrated out loud, are worthy of celebration.

I want to close by reflecting on what this emergence - or perhaps just revelation - of antisemitism among the Yale community does, and doesn’t, mean. First, humility is in order: things are changing quickly, and we can’t know what the coming months, or years, will hold. We may be afraid, but linear extrapolation is never a good method of prediction, and we should be judicious, not despairing, in how we think and especially in how we speak. God forbid that we would irreversibly write off any member of the Yale community or the human community - hard as it may be, and hand in hand with our equal obligation to confront antisemitism rather than meekly submitting to it, we will also extend the benefit of the doubt, and talk, and educate, and listen.

There is something more profound yet. Thousands of Jews attended Yale over many generations, including times when it was an inhospitable and unsympathetic place to our people. And those Jews not only survived: they mastered their fields of study, and set the groundwork for the flourishing community that we inhabit and create today. The tragedy we are encountering is that we are not the sole authors of the meaning of Jewishness: those around us can contribute notes of fear, distance, and mistrust - and we can’t control how they construe our Jewishness, or what they project onto us. But the triumph of Jewish life is that the greater part of the meaning of Jewishness is what we make of it - no one can or will have more influence over our lives, and the lives of the other Jewish students at Yale, than we will - by

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weaving the fullness of your kaleidoscopically diverse selves into the sacred bonds of a community that is stronger, not strained, for the difference it contains.

Over these past two weeks, I have so often felt the deepest sadness for each of you: I would give anything for the world you are entering to be one where your Jewishness doesn't make you a target - for Hamas's violence, or for the wild fears of those whose worlds are warped by antisemitism. But I can't change that, and though we need to work to keep ourselves safe and to educate - we ultimately can't control the actions of others.

And in equal measure these past two weeks, I have felt the greatest pride and gratitude for the honor of being Jewish, of living in and for this community, and of bearing the gifts of our tradition. To come together in song and in tears, and in study and in prayer, and in service and in kindness, in Slifka and in classrooms, and in dorm rooms, and elsewhere- in a situation none of us could have foreseen but, somehow, were all prepared for - I cannot imagine greater gifts, or a nobler way of life. As I pass through the halls of Slifka, and see each of you around campus, and consult with my colleagues at Slifka and at Chabad, I find myself grounded and lifted in a way that no one, and no hatred, can diminish. I hope, more than anything, that you have been touched by that as well, and that you will carry from this formative moment not only notes of fear and mistrust for the world (there will, and sadly should, be some of those), but also a robust gratitude and confidence and pride in this ineffable thing we carry with us with each breath, and each song, and each Shabbat - the blessing of living a Jewish life.

Shabbat shalom,  
Jason

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